

Explained: Syria's Cooperative Housing Sector

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Cooperative housing, which is implemented by cooperatives, is often considered a supplement to the [social housing](#) programmes run by Syria's public sector. Until 2011, cooperative and social housing represented 23 percent of Syria's construction sector, according to past statements by the [Ministry of Public Works and Housing](#).

The first legislation to regulate cooperatives of any kind came in 1950, with Legislative Decree No. 65. Then, during the period of Syrian-Egyptian unity, Law No. 93 of 1958 was issued to impose Egypt's Cooperative Law No. 317 of 1956, which tied all relevant associations, including those for housing, to the [Ministry of Social Affairs](#) and Labour. Law No. 13 of 1981, was issued to regulate the work of housing cooperatives, before being modified by Law No. 17 of 2007. That law was replaced by Decree No. 99 of 2011.

Housing cooperatives are all grouped within one trade union body, the [General Union for Housing Cooperatives](#) (GUHC), which was founded in 1961 and regulated through the Housing Cooperative Societies Law No. 13 of 1981. The GUHC was then dissolved under Legislative Decree No. 37 of 2019, 58 years after its founding, with the pretext of preventing the duplication of housing administrations in each governorate: namely, the General Union and the [Ministry of Public Works and Housing](#). Decree No. 37 transferred the duties, functions and both movable and immovable properties of the GUHC to the [Ministry of Public Works and Housing](#). The ministry subsequently led a large-scale campaign to dissolve and liquidate hundreds of cooperatives.

Housing cooperatives are mainly tasked with building and selling housing to subscribers at an affordable cost. The state provides many advantages to such cooperatives, such as cheap, often expropriated land, concessionary loans, easily obtained construction permits and the ability to purchase materials in reasonable quantities at officially-set prices.

Despite the government's concerted effort to dissolve ineffective cooperatives after the GUHC's dissolution, there are still a few thousand cooperatives with around one million members. To establish a housing cooperative, at least 100 people must meet and sign a special contract under which they gain their official approvals. Under Decree No. 99 of 2011, the signatories must not have previously benefited from housing provided by a public entity or cooperative.

With Syria's housing crisis and the rise in housing prices, cooperatives offered a solution to help many people own homes at reasonable prices. However, housing cooperatives managed to fall into the spiral of corruption and clientelism, trafficking, and abuse of influence to acquire land offered by the state at minimal prices.

Bureaucratic procedures imposed by the [Ministry of Public Works and Housing](#) also constrain cooperatives. The ministry may take decades to provide the land needed for construction, with no justification for the delay. And in some cases, cooperatives have been used as a cover by public institutions to expropriate land legally before using it for an entirely different construction project later on.

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